



CRAIG HICKMAN 2016-09-28

## FREDRIC JAMESON – UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA, AND THE MYTH OF NEOLIBERALISM

LEXICON, NECROPOLITICS, PHILOFICTION CAPITALISM, DYSTOPIA, FREDERIC JAMESON, NEOLIBERALISM, UTOPIA

*MAN is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.*

~Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

*It is easier, someone once said, to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism: and with that the idea of a revolution overthrowing capitalism seems to have vanished.*

~Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*

The two epigraphs are well known to many on the Left and Right as being the bookends of a discourse that stretches from the Enlightenment to the demise of Soviet Communism in '89. After the fall of utopian ideologies we've come to the point where such artificial dreams lie in a vacuous realm of fantasy rather than in any prospects for a future reality – and, to be fair, let us also remember what Susan Buck-Morass stated in her excellent survey of both Communist and Capitalist ideological utopianism:

The Construction of mass utopia was the dream of the twentieth century. It was the driving ideological force of industrial modernization in both its capitalist and socialist forms. The dream was itself an immense material power that transformed the natural world, investing industrially produced objects and built environments with collective, political desire. Whereas the night dreams of individuals express desires thwarted by the social order and pushed backward into regressive childhood forms, this collective dream dared to imagine a social world in alliance with personal happiness, and promised to adults that its realization would be in harmony with the overcoming of scarcity for all.<sup>1</sup> (9)

This leads me to the new book that once again tries to answer Jameson's *Utopian Manifesto*. I speak of *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* which brings together Jameson's original manifesto, *An American Utopia* along with short stories, essays, and critical appraisal of this work. As Slavoj Zizek in his forward suggests this manifesto questions the standard leftist notions of an emancipated society, advocating— among other things— universal conscription as the model for the communist reorganization of society, fully acknowledging envy and resentment as the central problem of a communist society, and rejecting dreams of overcoming the division between work and pleasure. Endorsing the axiom that to change society one

should begin by changing one's dreams about an emancipated society, Jameson's text is ideally placed to trigger a debate on possible and imaginable alternatives to global capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

Whether one is on the Left or Right of the political spectrum it's a work one should reckon with as part of an ongoing debate about the future prospects of politics or even civilization. Jameson in his manifesto will return to the roots of the malaise within the Left after the notorious failure of '68, of the coming to light of the gulags in Soviet Russia, of a turn toward anti-institutional and anarchic forms of disgruntlement against the State, which with the work of one of postmodernity's key figures, Michel Foucault becomes as Jameson relates

a dystopian obsession, a quasi-paranoid fear of any form of political or social organization— whether in the formation of political parties of one kind or another or in speculation about the construction of future societies radically different from this one— as well as a desperate brandishing of the terminologies of freedom and democracy by leftists, who ought to know better and to appreciate the quasi-ownership of this language by Western "democracies" or, in other words, by late capitalism. (2)

He'll relate a history of the Left at once fragmentation, dissolution, degradation, and ultimately powerless before the juggernaut of what would become infamously the "Neoliberal Era" of late capitalism.

There are from a Left perspective probably hundreds if not thousands of published books, essays, dissertations, etc. on this iconic image of our era that embellishes the artifacts of scholarship, economics, and political thought under the rubric of neoliberalism. In a sense the basic difference between the old industrial order and neoliberalism is typified by a statement like this from Franco Berardi in an interview: "In the old industrial age, the process of antagonism, liberation, and the creation of autonomy was essentially a matter of exiting the space of production, of leaving the factory and creating a community around the refusal to work. In the times we are living in now, the topography of social composition has changed. In the digital age, the community of workers do not need to — and really can't — come out of society's "factory". We have to change the network while remaining inside it. This is the difficulty of the present condition." (The European: Franco Berardi on Work and Europe) The point he makes is that the whole of the globalist enterprise, the neoliberal order itself that forms the basis of worldwide economics, trade, politics, law, social relations, etc. is now a completed Factory System from which no single nation can exit without suffering the dire consequences of such action in being expunged and enslaved by the totalistic system that pervades every aspect of global existence. For better or worse we are now all inside the Factory without outlet with nowhere to go, nowhere to hide, no place to run too or empty place of revolt. The nomos of the earth is bound hook, line, and sinker with the globalist systems, whether in China, Russia, Europe, or the Americas — with India, Iran, Africa and all other nations falling into line with the various capitalist players among the Great Powers, etc..

Of course one could chase the proverbial tail of the donkey and produce a litany of historical data regarding the early Mount Pelerin Society: the early work of those early figures who would form the basis of the ideological and economic kernel of this notion, and who would themselves never use the term within their own writings. As Wendy Brown recently suggests neoliberalism is not so much an ideology as it is "a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms, is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy".<sup>3</sup> As she goes on to suggest

These elements include vocabularies, principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule, and above all, democratic imaginaries. My argument is not merely that markets and money are corrupting or degrading democracy, that political institutions and outcomes are increasingly dominated by finance and corporate capital, or that democracy is being replaced by plutocracy— rule by and for the rich. Rather, neoliberal reason, ubiquitous today in statecraft and the workplace, in jurisprudence, education, culture, and a vast range of quotidian activity, is converting the distinctly political character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into economic ones.<sup>(17)</sup>

I need not spend time here reiterating the litany of this neoliberal history (I'll add a small bibliography at the end for those that would like to pursue it further). Instead I want to go back to Jameson's diagnosis, his critiques, and the prospects of change and utopian thought in the 21st Century. Is it a dead issue, or can we actually envision an alternative to this world-wide Global Factory System?

## AFTER THE FALL

*Social democracy is in our time irretrievably bankrupt, and communism seems dead.*

—Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*

As I ponder Brexit in the UK, the Presidential race in the US, the squandering and demise of social democracies in various Central and South American countries, the genocidal wars in the Middle-East with its own Brexit in ISIS, the various genocides and dark dooms in African nations that seem to be forever left out of our Northern media, the infighting in India of political and religious factions, Indonesia, and any number of other threats around the global sphere I grow more pessimistic and keep wonder if we are in the midst of a collapse of the globalist regime or if the consensual hallucination that once shaped some semblance of order has finally entered the realm of a completed nihilism once prophesied by Nietzsche over a hundred years ago. One is almost tempted to repeat the refrains from W.B. Yeats's famous poem *The Second Coming*:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity. ...*

Yet, one wants to ask: Was anyone every really innocent? Wasn't Rousseau's notion of a return to the innocence of the natural, of stripping humanity of the corruption of a false cultural overlay and returning them to the 'ceremony of innocence'. In fact Rousseau rather than being a liberator as many thought was in fact one of the first to promote the censoring of education. Rousseau devotes much space in *Emile* to an investigation of the ambiguities inherent in language, which he associates with the corruption attendant upon one's participation in civil society. "Restrict, therefore, the child's vocabulary as much as possible," Jean-Jacques advises the reader. "It is a very great disadvantage for him to have more words than ideas" (74). For Jean-Jacques, the most artificial form of language is literary language, and he often rails against "the instruments of [children's] greatest misery—that is, books. Reading is the plague of childhood and almost the only occupation we know how to give it" (116). Because the "child who reads does not think, he only reads; he is not informing himself, he learns words," *Emile* will have "No book other than the world, no instruction other than fact" garnered through his own sense-observations (168). If *Emile* "reads less well in our books than does another child," Jean-Jacques declares, "he reads better in the book of nature" (160).

As Henry Giroux in as many works of the dumbing down of Americans will tell us both major political parties, along with plutocrat "reformers," support educational reforms that increase conceptual and cultural illiteracy. Critical learning has been replaced with mastering test-taking, memorizing facts, and learning how not to question knowledge or authority.<sup>4</sup> Listening to the various philosophical chit-chat across the web I have heard how even long standing Chairs in Philosophy, Education, and other humanities departments are slowly being replaced, defunded, and more pragmatic and business related systems put in place. Giroux will go far as to ask "Is it any wonder that with the breakdown of critical education and the cultural apparatuses that support it, the American public now overwhelmingly supports state torture and capital punishment while decrying the necessity of a national health care system?" (8) The whole liberal educational apparatus that was built up since the Enlightenment is being dismantled before our eyes as if our economic masters no longer had need of an educated populace, or rather that they want us to keep our eye leveled only on the target of bare survival, of our everyday lives, of the mediamatrix parade of Reality TV, Big Brother, Kardashians, The Bachelor or Bachelorette, Alien History (on the History channel no less), Ghost hunters on the Travel Channel, conspiracy theory, Mountain Men, Alaskan renegades and anarchists living in the failing wilderness, Truck drivers ambling down the melting tundra of climate warming, Fishermen on the High Seas pulling dangerous hauls in hundred foot waves... a world of distraction and danger to keep us bound to the safe harbors of our Neoliberal benefactors who will protect us if we will only continue to play the game correctly according to the latest Political Correctness campaign slogan...

Sadly even as Jameson surmises our great democracies cannot offer change, only talk:

It should be understood that under the current system of representative government, the political parties can never accomplish any of these things, but they can talk about them, they can make them thinkable and conceivable once again, they can plant the seeds and rekindle the possibility of imagining future praxis— and they can reestablish these themes in their legitimate place in the public sphere.(8)

Can they? How? What has talk or even all the thousands of books from leftist thinkers in since 1968 done to effect real change? And, of course I don't mean the marginal change in race, feminist, gender, social and collective chit-chat and aggrandizement; no, I mean real change... and, don't point to Obama's neoliberal reformism of the health-care industry as a sign of change; it's more veneer and candy coated nod to the Insurance companies and the release from financial burdens to the corporate cronies of Wall Street. The people have to pay for this insurance, or if lucky – and their State has some funding they'll get some benefits from insurance provided at State expense up to a point. (I know, I know... you'll argue I'm leaving out a thousand and one sundry things, overlooking this and that change, etc.) That's not what I'm talking of... I'm talking of real change in the very structure and economics of our everyday lives. Where is it? Are we really better off on this planet than eight years ago? The only class that seems truly better off is the upper .01%, while the rest of us live from paycheck to paycheck. Caput!

## DUAL POWER

"As for the realization of such monumental changes, that can only be the task of dual power as such; and it is now time to examine our society as it is today in order to weigh the chances for dual power and to identify those already existing institutions which could be its vehicle." (Jameson, 9)

There was a time here in the USA when the Unions offered a break against the corruption of the State and Corporations, but as Jameson remarks: "Unions no longer offer an effective chance at dual power, if they ever did." (9) The problem of reunification is that the industrial factory economy of those former Fordist era workers no longer exists, the factories are now outliers in the Third

World nations of the world ruled by slave labor and unregulated nefarious regimes.

For Jameson the second issue is that in our age workers are mostly part of a vast "gray market": not illegal work in the sense of criminality, drug smuggling and distribution and the like, but rather ad hoc work from job to job and from place to place, on the order of mobile food trucks or informal car repair from neighborhood to neighborhood out of your own pickup. (10) I know in my own industry as a Software Engineer I did mainly piecemeal contract work in the final years of my working life, traveling here and there doing bid jobs, controlled by specific time allotments, contracts, agreements that were all carefully monitored, documented, and surveilled. Everything little detail of work and play come under complete datafied scrutiny in the job market of the new economy. We are no people or individuals, but rather dividuals – electronic bits of data in an economic process of indexing and constant cost-analysis that never stops. We lost our humanity long ago as far as the economic system itself operates. Jameson will go so far to suggest that maybe we should conclude that in this society it is in fact the Mafia which offers the most suggestive example of already existing dual power; however, its effectiveness in a national context seems to have waned as significantly as that of the unions themselves. (10)

## THE POLITICS OF REAL ESTATE

*I will put a very simple proposition to you: namely that today, all politics is about real estate.*

–Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*

The depopulation of the world, the refugee crisis, the great migrations around the planet, the Palestinian question, resettlements, genocide, expulsions, austerity, gentrification, the slumification of the world is about real estate: "all these struggles result from the commodification of land, the dissolution of the last remnants of feudalism and its peasantries, and their replacement by industrial agriculture or agribusiness and farmworkers." (13) Time has disappeared and now we live in the absolute space of neoliberalism, a realm of pure timeless incorporation and absorption into the machinic life of an energetic economy of absolute profit. The world is an infospheric virtual matrix of profitizing algorithms in which every last aspect of the human equation has been expunged and replaced by an endless system of duplication and reduplication of endless circulations of profit. As Jameson puts it:

Postmodernity in general is characterized by this new kind of present of time, a reduction to the body. In this new dialectic of omnipresent space and the living or temporal present, history, historicity, the sense of history, is the loser: the past is gone, we can no longer imagine the future. (13)

It's as if the neoliberal order has become the very trap within which we all now exist. As Jean Baudrillard once remarked "there's something entertaining in the spectacle of the present world racing out of control and ultimately unhinging *itself*, incapable as it is of escaping its own logic, as though it were caught in its own trap." In fact he'd elaborate it this way

"Objective reality – reality related to meaning and representation- gives way to integral reality, a reality without limits in which everything is realized and technically materialized without reference to any principle or final purpose whatever..."<sup>5</sup>

One might describe it as a vast infosphere in which the virtual and actual have changed places: it denotes the whole informational environment constituted by all informational entities (thus including information agents as well), their properties, interactions, processes, and mutual relations. It is an environment comparable to, but different from, cyberspace, which is only one of its sub-regions, as it were, since it also includes offline and analogue spaces of information. Maximally, it is a concept that, given an informational ontology, can also be used as synonymous with reality, or Being.<sup>6</sup> As François Hartog suggests in *Regimes of Historicity*

Today's presentism can ... be experienced as emancipation or enclosure: ever greater speed and mobility or living from hand to mouth in a stagnating present. Not to forget a further aspect of our present: that the future is perceived as a threat not a promise. The future is a time of disasters, and ones we have, moreover, brought upon ourselves. <sup>7</sup> (xviii)

We live in a time of both acceleration and deceleration, depending upon what end of the spectrum of the political and economic ladder one happens to exist. Those on the top tier seem to effortlessly glide through this spatial matrix with little difficulty, escaping the struggling masses of economic slaves in their zombie enclaves far below the .01% hideaways in those luxury worlds of super yachts, smart cities – global hubs of business and securitized trade and safety, and the protected domains of national security from Dubai to Singapore to New York or elsewhere...

## THE GENERIC CITY

Rem Koolhaas has invented the concept "Generic City," associated with the notion of "Junkspace." This is where presentism is really at home, eating up space and reducing or banishing time. The Generic City, freed from its enslavement to the center, is without history, even if it goes to great lengths to advertise its pseudo-historical district, where history is a service provided, complete with quaint trains and horse-drawn carriages. And if, despite everything, a center survives, it has to be at once "the most old and the most new," "the most fixed and the most dynamic." As the product of "an encounter between escalator and air-conditioning, conceived in an incubator of Sheetrock," Junkspace never ages: it knows only self-destruction and on-site

rebuilding or else almost instantaneous dilapidation. Airports, completed or (constantly) under construction (the ubiquitous “Work in progress. We apologize for the temporary inconvenience caused”) have become emblematic of the Generic City. They are forever transforming and mutating, while imposing ever more complex trajectories on their temporary inhabitants. As bubbles of expanding, transformable space, they epitomize Junkspace, and are its principle producers. Such space leaves no trace in our memories, because “its refusal to freeze ensures instant amnesia.” (Hartog, xix).

Yet, as Zygmunt Bauman, in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* tells the story the workers who live and work in the shadows of these superluxury enclaves are treated as economic slaves:

‘these men and women lose not only their jobs, their projects, their orientation points, the confidence of being in control of their lives; they also find themselves stripped of their dignity as workers, of self-esteem, of the feeling of being useful and having a social place of their own.’ (Baumann, 13)

On a planet where more than 2 billion people subsist on two dollars or less a day, these dreamworlds enflame desires—for infinite consumption, total social exclusion and physical security, and architectural monumentality—that are clearly incompatible with the ecological and moral survival of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the world lives in poverty, chaos, decay, degradation, and toxic environments where water, energy, food, housing, and medicine are almost nil while the upper echelons of the rich live in luxury dreamworlds built on slave labor. What to do? As Jameson asks: if business, the professions, religion, even the labor unions (let alone the post office or the Mafia) are inadequate vehicles for dual power, what can then be left in late capitalism as an already organized institution capable of assuming the parallel and ultimately revolutionary role on which alone radical social change depends? (18-19) Then, what if? As a final project he proposes a cartoon vision of everyone joining the Army, of then being provided the very benefits that all soldiers are provide countermanding the need for congressional approval, etc.. Of course he knows this is silly, that the deplorable conditions of our VA Administrative medical corp. and its health services alone (i.e., underfunded, undermanned, mismanaged, etc.) is enough to see it as a cartoon world. Yet, on a serious note as he suggests that one of the first things we should think through is the political itself: “We must also cure ourselves of the habit of thinking politically, for politics is the art of power and of the state.” (22)

Another facet it that in our time the Subject as Subject – as liberal individual has vanished, and the politics of the liberal subject along with it in both neuroscientific and philosophical terms; not to mention, political terms. And, Jameson, will tell us if the singular individual as a concept is dead, our notions of the collective are too:

We should be willing to do the same for all the forms in which thinkers have failed in much the same way to conceptualize collective entities. ...

That is, owing to our individuation as biological individuals, the collective is as such also impossible to conceptualize. This is the point Rousseau was trying to make in *The Social Contract* by proposing a kind of unthinkable, unrepresentable “regulative idea” in his “general will”; when Kant praised the emergence of the written constitution, he was not endorsing a type of government or state, but rather singling out the moment when a collectivity comes to “maturity” (or the coming to age at which the individual is liberated from tutelage), by taking the formation of the new society into its own hands, as a deliberate and collective act. (23)

Yet, for Jameson the false movement into some homogenized collective entity is doomed from the beginning, the world has no big Other behind the scenes to recon with, instead there is the sheer numbers of multitudes and multiplicity of others who cannot be reduced to any unity at all. Nor can we retreat into micro-groups, into nostalgic dreams of clans or ancient pagan worlds of blood, kith and kin. Jameson offers this as the moment when we need to pass from what remains a concrete political program— the conscription of the entire population into some glorified National Guard— to that rather different matter which is the imagining of utopias. And here, to be sure, we enter a no-man’s-land (which is also that of dual power), in which assessments of the current situation give way to personal and private visions of all kinds and in which rational revolutionary calculations necessarily give way to fantasy, including those of the crackpots and oddballs who were our great utopian thinkers. This is therefore the moment in which we may all begin to diverge, substituting our private utopian predilections and gadgets for sober analysis. (26)

But what kind of Army? He’s not suggesting military is he? Should we look back into history?

More than three quarters of a century ago, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that the “demoralization caused by vast unemployment is our greatest extravagance. Morally it is the greatest menace to our social order.” He also insisted that he would “stand or fall” by his “refusal to accept as a necessary condition of our future a permanent army of unemployed.” On the contrary, he said, “we must make it a national principle that we will not tolerate a large army of unemployed and that we will arrange our national economy to end our present unemployment as soon as we can and then take wise measures against its return. I do not think it is the destiny of any American to remain permanently on relief rolls.”

To put people back to work, FDR launched a series of programs designed to protect America’s environment (through the CCC reforestation programs and creation of the shelter belt in the Midwest to bring an end to the Dust Bowl) and build America’s economic infrastructure. The most famous of these was launched seventy-six years ago today: the Works Progress Administration or WPA. Between 1935 and 1943, the WPA literally built the infrastructure of modern America, including 572,000

miles of rural roads, 67,000 miles of urban streets, 122,000 bridges, 1,000 tunnels, 1,050 fifty airfields, and 4,000 airport buildings. It also constructed 500 water treatment plants, 1,800 pumping stations, 19,700 miles of water mains, 1,500 sewage treatment plants, 24,000 miles of sewers and storm drains, 36,900 schools, 2,552 hospitals, 2,700 firehouses, and nearly 20,000 county, state, and local government buildings.

Conservatives critics charged that the WPA was a "make work" program, but its accomplishments, which touched nearly every community in America, continue to make a mockery of this charge. The WPA put millions of skilled and unskilled laborers back to work — it was a requirement of the program that all those involved in the projects, from the architects and engineers down to the construction laborers, be hired by WPA dollars. It provided the critical economic infrastructure needed to bring the United States into the modern age.

Is this what we need today? A new army of workers united in rebuilding a world worth living in? Is this the type of programs we need to provide the dual power of which Jameson sees necessary to counter the State and Corporate moneyed powers?

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I can't finish my discussion in one post.. this will need to be continued in further posts in interaction with Jameson's manifesto, along with the others who have supported, affirmed, or critiqued his proposals. Stay tuned for further posts...

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taken from alien ecologies

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